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ABSTRACT

The field of ethnography is expected to provide reliable, accurate information regarding some aspect of an unfamiliar culture. However, this contribtuion is only useful if the results are presented along with a description and critical evaluation of the context in which the data was obtained. An example of failure to do this is found in an ethnographic description of a Maltese village used in a popular text. The author's descriptions of social class, patronage, and status of the church within the village are based on his own position as a friend of powerful members of Maltese society and of the village priest. This situation, where the context of acquired information is not carefully examined as to its potential effect on the information itself, may be all too common in ethnographic studies. Unless ethnographers delineate and assess the context of their work, this field of study cannot claim to present valid cultural descriptions. (LP)

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VALIDITY AND THE CONTEXTS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

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My motive for starting this paper arose after reading a newspaper story written by a journalist (the managing editor of my local paper) about food shortages in contemporary China. His story was supported by what a stranger who approached him in a market place in a Chinese town told him. Aha, I said to myself, here is an illustration of how ethnography is significantly different from other fields of reporting human behavior--in this case the journalist apparently doesn't bother to evaluate his source material with regard to how the context of receiving information may affect the nature of the information itself. But ethnographers would know that the characteristics of informants and the social situation in which their information is delivered must be understood before the information is useable.

However, the more I considered the body of recent ethnographic literature in which ethnographers reveal something of their procedures the less sure I became that this was a significant difference. In a minute I will supply some examples, but first let me state that I am not about to unmask some ethnographic "tricksters" who have deliberately falsified or negligently failed to verify descriptions of the societies they were responsible for studying (such as Demille's treatment of Castenada). Rather I will aim at a shortcoming in ethnographic method which has the result of leaving us with ethnographic information whose validity can be questioned.

If my argument is even occasionally on the mark, then ethnography has a real problem, for validity is exactly what it is supposed to deliver. It is not just information about other ways of life--lots of people do that from tourists to individuals from the societies themselves. It is

not just information derived from personal involvement such as participant observation--many people may do this too, from missionaries to Peace Corps volunteers. It is certainly not any particular kind of information, although ethnographers might claim special expertise in describing kinship terminology or stone knapping. The contribution that ethnography is expected to make is a reliable and accurate description of some part of an unfamiliar culture. Ethnographers are supposed to correct for ethnocentric bias, learn another language, experience and participate in a group's social activities, recruit informants, record innumerable observations and synthesize their findings in such a skilled fashion that the result is a valid description of what some other society is actually like in its normal round of life. Yet as large and demanding a task as this kind of study is, my argument is that it is only useful if its results are presented along with a description and critical evaluation of the context in which the data upon which it was based was obtained.

Let me now give two examples where this condition has apparently not been satisfied drawn from the ethnographic description of a Maltese village by Jeremy Boissevain. I should state that the only reason I have picked this (out of many that could serve) is that it is one of a series of case studies in ethnographic description and method published by Holt, Rinehart. It is therefore widely used as a text, and it is completely outside my own culture area (which is Eastern Africa). I have no theoretical dispute in process with Dr. Boissevain--his work will simply illustrate my argument.

Boissevain did all the necessary ethnographic operations. He learned Maltese as part of his graduate studies in social anthropology

in London, he went through the red tape of securing permission to do a study of a Maltese village, he made arrangements with local contacts to get housing in the village for himself and his family, he made friends and acquired informants while participating in the life of one village for five months, he diligently recorded the information he was receiving from villagers (especially from his informants), he carried out a village census as well as examined archival material on the village. The result was a description of village-level Maltese society (published in two similar books Saints and Fireworks, and A Village in Malta). These books describe the important features of village life such as occupation, marriage and family systems, but especially they describe the central position of Roman Catholicism, the village church, and the parish priest in the life of the village. This includes the operation of the several sacred and secular (or perhaps not-so-sacred) associations which occupy much of village affairs such as the two rival band clubs which organize yearly two "festas" (fiestas) for St. Martin and St. Rocco. Also described is a system of social classes based upon occupation and prestige and a patronage system associated with it whereby favors are given by influential persons in return for allegiance. All this makes interesting and absorbing reading in the good ethnographic tradition of making the structure of another society come to life.

Boissevain (1970) also recounts his fieldwork activities to demonstrate the trials and tribulations of getting established in a foreign society and how he dealt with these problems. But his account also raises questions about the validity of his study. It gives evidence of hard work, commitment, involvement, and insight certainly--but not the kind of back-

ground context sufficient to establish that what he states about Maltese society is not partly an artifact of his own presence and of the kinds of relationships he had within the village. Let us examine two instances of this effect.

The first deals with Boissevain's description of social class and patronage. He claims that the villagers are very sensitive to relative prestige rankings and strive to make use of, and give out, favors through patronage. In fact, Boissevain was for two years the chief of the CARE office in Malta before starting his graduate studies. During this time he was a member of the elite class. When he returned to live in the village he was able to explicitly demonstrate his friendship and influence with powerful members of the larger Maltese society many times to the villagers. He was undoubtedly a potential patron--and this must have had an effect on his acquisition of information about patronage and class rankings. If nothing else, perhaps he learned much more of it than really exists? The important thing is that he doesn't indicate that he was aware of this, and even if he was, he doesn't estimate what effect this contextual feature would have had on his information--maybe nothing, but this cannot just be taken for granted.

The second deals with his description of the central position of the church and the priest in village life. Boissevain secured housing by having a priest friend from his CARE days request that the parish priest in the village find a place for him. This village priest (Dun Gorg) apparently was an aggressively dominant force in village life. He finds housing on the grounds of a family who must be in that faction of the village closely allied with church affairs and the operation of church-allied

associations. This particular priest not only actively supports only one of the band clubs, he also goes so far as to assert himself by having his own coat-of-arms placed on the church's chancel wall as part of a village-financed effort to refurbish it. He becomes one of Boissevain's major informants on village life and the family affairs of the villagers. Further, one of his close lay associates becomes another major informant. The particular position of these individuals, and the fact of Bossevain's dependence upon them, must have had some effect on the information he obtained on the position of the church in village affairs, yet again there is no assessment of what it may have been. Perhaps it had none, but this cannot be taken for granted.

What I fear is that this type of condition-where the context of acquiring information is not carefully examined as to its potential effect on the information itself--is common to too many ethnographies. I think that this may be due to our belief that the "facts" of social life are there waiting to be described. Although we have become quite sensitized recently to the necessity of confronting all those very important details of getting placed within a community--getting an introduction, our sex, marital status, and age, where we stay, who feeds us, which dialect we have learned, and so on. But still, once we get past these obstacles, the "facts" (patronage, theorcracy, belief in male superiority, etc.) will be there waiting. These "obstacles" only become something to reminisce about later as something that we overcame in gaining rapport. But we do not include them as a necessary part of how our "facts" were shaped.

Ethnography is too important to our discipline not to demand that the validity of every ethnographer's work be critically evaluated against the context in which it was conducted. To Boissevain's credit, at least he

provides the basis for suspecting the quality of this description, but not the critical information to evaluate it (and perhaps accept it as a valid description of Maltese village life from the perspective of a pro-church elite). So the criticism remains. I conclude with the recommendation that it is the duty of each ethnographer to critically delineate and assess the context of their work and that unless this is done ethnography cannot lay clear claim to the honor of valid cultural description.

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